

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN



**First records for Niger of Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius*, Grassland Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus*, Buff-bellied Warbler *Phyllolais pulchella* and Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus***

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*Published in:*  
African Bird Club. Bulletin

*Publication date:*  
2005

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Diget Christensen, K., Tøttrup, A. P., Rahner, M., & Brouwerd, J. (2005). First records for Niger of Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius*, Grassland Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus*, Buff-bellied Warbler *Phyllolais pulchella* and Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*. *African Bird Club. Bulletin*, 12(2), 162-164.

# First records for Niger of Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius*, Grassland Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus*, Buff-bellied Warbler *Phyllolais pulchella* and Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus*

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Premières mentions pour le Niger du Coucou solitaire *Cuculus solitarius*, du Pipit africain *Anthus cinnamomeus*, du Phyllolaïs à ventre fauve *Phyllolais pulchella* et de la Pie-grièche isabelle *Lanius isabellinus*. Les observations de quatre espèces nouvelles pour le Niger sont documentées. Le chant d'un Coucou solitaire *Cuculus solitarius* a été clairement entendu en savane boisée, à environ 43 km à l'ouest de Diffa (13°12'N 12°08'E), le 25 septembre 2003. Le même jour, à environ 4 km vers l'est (13°12'N 12°11'E), deux Phyllolaïs à ventre fauve *Phyllolais pulchella* ont été observés. Un Pipit africain *Anthus cinnamomeus* a été découvert à environ 44 km au nord-est de Tahoua (15°04'N 05°38'E), le 25 juillet 2003. Une Pie-grièche isabelle *Lanius isabellinus* a été notée le long de la route Niamey–Tillabéri (13°47'N 01°39'E) en janvier 1994; le 19 septembre 2003, deux mâles ont été observés à environ 10 km au sud de Tanout (14°54'N 08°51'E).

The avifauna of Niger is still relatively little known. Since Giraudoux *et al.*'s (1988) summary, few studies on the occurrence and distribution of birds in Niger have been published. Here, Giraudoux *et al.* (1988) was used as the main reference for records prior to 1986; for post-1986 records, Newby *et al.* (1987), Sharland (1989), Holyoak & Seddon (1991), Sauvage (1993), Debout *et al.* (2000), Ambagis *et al.* (2003) and Crisler *et al.* (2003) were consulted. Most previous ornithological observations were made in the south-west, around the capital Niamey and in 'W' National Park. A more systematic study of Niger's avifauna, especially in the east and north of the country, is therefore likely to produce new findings.

In 2003 KDC, APT and MCR made observations of birds in Niger as a part of the Projet Régional de Lutte Intégrée contre les Sauteriaux au Sahel (PRÉLISS), funded by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). Field work was undertaken in three areas: around Tahoua in the west-centre of the country, between Magaria and Tanout in the central-south (near Zinder), and around Diffa in the east. Three new species for Niger were discovered: Red-chested Cuckoo *Cuculus solitarius*, Grassland Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus* and Buff-bellied Warbler *Phyllolais pulchella*. Isabelline Shrike *Lanius isabellinus* was

also sighted, and details of this record are also presented, along with a previously unpublished record by JB in 1994. These records are documented below.

## Red-chested Cuckoo

On 25 September 2003, at 06.30 hrs, a Red-chested Cuckoo was heard by MCR in wooded savanna, c.43 km west of Diffa and c.10 km from the Komadougou-Yobé River (13°12'N 12°08'E; zone 4 in Giraudoux *et al.* 1988). Dense gallery forest occurs in places along this river and further south dense woodland is widespread. The call was a loud, far-carrying *WHIT whit weeu*, endlessly repeated with short intervals. The observer is familiar with this distinctive call from many other parts of Africa, as well as with vocalisations of all the other cuckoos of the region. No other cuckoo that might be found in West African savannas has a similar call; that of Black Cuckoo *Cuculus clamorosus* is also three-syllabled but quite different (Fry *et al.* 1988, Borrow & Demey 2001).

Red-chested Cuckoo is a resident and intra-African migrant, visiting wooded savannas in the north of its range in March–December (Fry *et al.* 1988, Borrow & Demey 2001). The nearest published record is from Potiskum in the northern Sudan zone of north-east Nigeria (11°45'N 11°02'E) c.200 km south-west of Diffa (Elgood *et al.* 1994). In Togo, the northernmost observations

are from gallery forest within woodland or shrub savanna (Cheke & Walsh 1996). It remains to be determined whether the species regularly occurs in the Diffa area or whether rainfall induced the bird to stray further north than usual.

### Grassland Pipit

On 25 July 2003, a pipit was flushed from an area of agricultural fields and grassland with a few trees, c.44 km north-east of Tahoua (15°04'N 05°38'E; zone 5 in Giraudoux *et al.* 1988). Millet and cow-pea were the dominant crops, and cattle and goats were present. A rather large part had recently been burned. The bird flew with long, deep undulations before landing, whereupon it was observed in detail. It was a large, long-tailed and long-legged pipit, with an upright posture. Crown and upperparts were heavily streaked dark, and a pale supercilium and dark moustachial stripe gave the head a distinct pattern. The underparts were buff, with distinct streaking restricted to the chest. The outer tail feathers appeared white.

The streaked upperparts exclude Plain-backed Pipit *Anthus leucophrys* and Tawny Pipit *A. campestris*. Long-billed Pipit *A. similis* (subspecies *asbenaicus*), resident in the Aïr Mountains and Monts Bagzans, central Niger (c.350 km northeast of our locality) has no breast spotting, is sandy buff and has more buffish outer tail feathers (Keith *et al.* 1992). The bold streaking above and on the chest, and the striking facial pattern, combined with the habitat (recently burnt ground, open savanna, cultivated areas) leave Grassland Pipit *Anthus cinnamomeus* as the only possibility (Borrow & Demey 2001).

### Buff-bellied Warbler

On 25 September 2003, at 08.00 hrs, two small warblers were seen in an *Acacia* tree within a grassland area, c.39 km west of Diffa (13°12'N 12°11'E; zone 4 in Giraudoux *et al.* 1988). They chased each other in the treetop for several minutes. The first impression was of a *Phylloscopus*-sized warbler, but the body appeared shorter and more slender, and the tail longer. The upperparts were uniform olive-grey, contrasting with the yellowish-buff underparts. The tail had conspicuous white edges. The legs appeared pinkish.

The birds were identified as Buff-bellied Warblers; their size and shape, and their white-edged tail eliminates all *Phylloscopus*, *Apalis* and

*Sylvia* warblers (Urban *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001). Buff-bellied Warbler's range includes north-east Nigeria and Cameroon and western Chad (Elgood *et al.* 1994, Urban *et al.* 1997, Borrow & Demey 2001), where it is uncommon to locally common. Its discovery in Niger thus constitutes only a minor range extension.

### Isabelline Shrike

On 4 January 1994, while a passenger in a car on the Niamey–Tillabéri road, JB saw a shrike flying away from the road near the turn-off to the ferry at Farié (13°47'N 01°39'E; zone 2 in Giraudoux *et al.* 1988). Clearly visible were a somewhat pale orange-brown rump and back, a brownish tail, and dark wings with a white bar. These are characteristics of Isabelline Shrike (Fry *et al.* 2000, Borrow & Demey 2001). The white wingbar and orange-brown rump exclude adult or young Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*. Emin's Shrike *L. gubernator* lacks a brown tail and the upperparts of the juvenile are barred. All other brown-backed shrikes in the Sahel are grey-brown, not orange-brown. We conclude that the bird was an Isabelline Shrike, the first for Niger.

On 19 September 2003, two male Isabelline Shrikes were observed foraging in flat, dry grassland with widespread trees and low bushes, c.10 km south of Tanout (14°54'N 08°51'E; zone 3 in Giraudoux *et al.* 1988). Both perched atop low bushes. They had a distinctive rufous rump and tail, contrasting with an evenly dull greyish-brown to sandy mantle and an almost unmarked body (without scaling).

Isabelline Shrike is a Palearctic migrant to Chad, Nigeria and Cameroon, with a few records from Mauritania, northern Senegal, The Gambia, Mali and Gabon (Fry *et al.* 2000, Borrow & Demey 2001). Maps in Fry *et al.* (2000) and Borrow & Demey (2001) show the species as occurring in eastern and southern Niger on migration, although this appears unsubstantiated. The nearest records are from the Sahel zone in Mali (Lamarche 1981) and from northern Nigeria (Elgood *et al.* 1994).

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) for financing the PRéLISS project. Ron Demey and Nik Borrow made helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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## First record of Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* for Benin

Ben van Muyen

**Première mention de la Mouette rieuse *Larus ridibundus* pour le Bénin.** Le 6 février 2003, deux ou trois Mouettes rieuses *Larus ridibundus* en plumage adulte internuptial ont été observées dans les marais de Guézin, au Lac Ahémé, à environ 30 km de Grand Popo, près de la frontière du Togo, dans le sud Bénin (06°24'N 01°57'E). Cette donnée constitue la première pour le pays.

Between 29 January and 15 February 2003, Barend van Gernerden and I visited Benin at the invitation of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), Netherlands, to undertake a study on the relationship between field biology, ecotourism and nature conservation. In the afternoon of 6 February 2003, we were birdwatching at Guézin marshes, Lac Ahémé, c.30 km from Grand Popo,

near the Togolese border in south Benin (06°24'N 01°57'E). The weather was dry and the light excellent. We observed many species of wader, as well as two or three gulls, which were feeding actively by picking items from the water surface. Although we expected them to be Grey-headed Gulls *Larus cirrocephalus*, with which I have experience from The Gambia and South Africa, the rather pointed wings with the conspicuous white leading edge to